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The Massachusetts Review, Volume 56, Number 3, Fall 2015, pp. 396-403 (Article)

Published by Massachusetts Review, Inc.
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mar.2015.0059*

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The Books of Jacob

Translated from Polish by Jennifer Croft

ON HOW IWANIE, A LITTLE VILLAGE ON THE DNIESTER, BECOMES A REPUBLIC

IWANIE IS NOT FAR from the fault that is the bed of the Dniester River. The way the village is arrayed along the Transnistrian plateau it looks like dishes set out on a table, too close to the table's edge. A single careless movement, and it will all come clattering down.

Through the middle of the village runs a river, sectioned off every few yards by primitive valves that produce little ponds and pools. Ducks and geese were once kept here. All that's left of them now is a few white feathers: the village was abandoned after the last plague. It has only been since August, (with the Schorrs' money and the benevolent bishop's blessing, since the village lies on his estate) that the true believers have resided here. As soon as the safe conduct is issued by the king, people begin to make their way to Iwanie in carriages and on foot—from the south, from Turkey, from the north, from the towns of Podolia. They are, by and large, the same people who'd camped out on the border after being expelled from Poland, people who discovered, on finally being permitted to return home, that in fact they no longer had homes. Their jobs had been given to others, and their houses had been looted and moved into, and if they wanted them back they'd have to try to figure out some way of asserting their property rights, by law or by force.

Some lost everything, especially those who made their living by trade and who'd had stalls and significant stock at the time. These people have nothing now. Like Shlomo of Nadwórna and his wife, Wittel. Shlomo and Wittel owned workshops in Nadwórna and Kopczyńce that made duvets. All winter women would come and pluck feathers, always overseen by Wittel, whose nature is swift, and clever. Then they would sew their warm quilts, so good they'd get commissioned by estates and palaces, their down light and fragrant, the exteriors ornate with pink patterned Turkish damask. But all this was lost in the later tumult. Feathers were strewn across Podolia by the wind, damask trampled or thieved. The house's roof caught

fire. Now it's uninhabitable.

Peeking out from the wintry mix of black and white, the little dwellings of Iwanie are overgrown with river reeds. A road winds along between them, traveling down the pocked, uneven yards that are strewn with the remnants of abandoned plows, rakes, shards of pots.

The village is run by Osman of Czerniowce, and it is he who posts guards at the village entrance, to prevent undesirables from straying in. Sometimes the entrance is blocked by carts. The horses stomp holes into the frozen ground.

Newcomers to the village must first go to Osman and leave all their money and valuables with him. Osman is Iwanie's steward, and he has an iron lockbox where he keeps the common holdings. His wife, Chava, Jacob's sister, manages the offerings from true believers across Podolia and the Turkish lands—the lockbox contains clothing, shoes, tools for work, pots, glass, and even children's toys. And it is Chava who assigns the morning's work to the men of the village. These men take the cart to get potatoes from a farmer; these others go for cabbage.

The community has its own cows and a hundred chickens. The chickens are a new acquisition—still the sounds of coop-building permeate the air, the noises of the perches being hammered in. Past the little houses there are community gardens. The gardens are pretty, though there isn't much in them yet: they arrived in August, too late to plant. Wild vines line the houses' roofs, untended, giving sweet little grapes. They were able to harvest some pumpkins. There was an abundance of plums, as well—small, dark, and sweet—and apple trees that bulged with apples. Now that the frosts have set in, everything's turned gray. Now they are all audience to the winter theater of putrefaction.

People arrive all winter, on a daily basis, especially from Wallachia and the Turkish lands, but also Czerniowce, Jassy, even Bucharest. All thanks to Osman—it is he who draws their brethren, especially those subjects of the Sultan who have already converted to Islam. From the local Podolian Jews these folk differ only slightly: they're a bit more tanned, more vibrant, readier to dance. Their songs are a little livelier. Languages, clothing, and headdress mix. Some wear turbans, like Osman and his plentiful family, while others wear fur *shtreimels*. Some sport Turkish fezzes. And northerners wear four-pointed caps. The children embrace their new playmates, those from Podolia and those from the East all chasing each other merrily around the ponds. When winter comes, they chase each other around the ice.

Quarters are tight. For now they crowd inside their little dwellings with their children and all of their possessions, and even so they're very cold, because the one thing they have none of in Iwanie is wood to burn. In the mornings the little panes of glass in the windows are covered in frost that forms patterns in an innocent imitation of the products of spring—leaves, buds, fern flower shoots.

Chaim of Kopczyńce and Osman allocate housing to newcomers. Chava, who's in charge of provisions, distributes blankets and pots, shows them where they can cook, where they can wash up—there is even a mikveh at the end of town. She explains that here everyone eats together and cooks together. And all work will be communal: the women will take care of the sewing, and the men will repair the buildings and find fuel. Only children and the elderly are entitled to milk.

And so the women launder, cook, sew, feed. There has already been one birth here, of a boy they named Jacob. Meanwhile the men head out in the mornings on business, seeking trade—earning money. In the evenings they convene. A couple of adolescents make up Iwanie's postal service, delivering packages on horseback, going all the way to Kamieniec if need be, sneaking across the border, to Turkey, to Czerniowce. From there the post goes on.

Yesterday the other Chaim, the one from Busko, Nachman's brother, brought Iwanie a herd of goats, dispensing them evenly around the different households—there is no little rejoicing over this, for there had not been enough milk for the children. The younger women assigned to the kitchen all leave their offspring with the older women, who have assembled a thing in one of the cottages that they call "kindergarten."

IT IS THE END OF NOVEMBER, and everyone in Iwanie is eager for Jacob's arrival. Scouts have been sent to the Turkish side. The younger boys stake out the river's high banks, inspect the older men's beards. A solemn silence has descended upon the village, everything ready since yesterday. Jacob's abode glistens, cleansed. Over the miserable floor of tamped-down clay they've unfurled kilims. Snow-white curtains hang in the windows.

And finally there are whistles and whoops from along the riverbanks. He is here.

At the entrance to the village, Osman of Czerniowce awaits, suffused with joy but solemn, and on seeing them, he starts to sing in a strong and beautiful voice: "*Dio mio, Baruchio* . . ." and the melody is taken up by the excited crowd that is waiting there, too. The procession that comes

around the bend looks like a Turkish formation. In its center is a carriage, and excited eyes seek Jacob out there—but Jacob is the man riding ahead, on the gray horse, dressed like a Turk, in a turban and a fur-lined light blue coat with broad sleeves. His beard is long and black, which lends him years. Jacob dismounts and touches his forehead to Osman's forehead, and Chaim's, laying his hands on their wives' heads. Osman leads him to his house, which is the largest in Iwanie; the yard all cleared, the entrance lined with spruce. But Jacob points at a little hut nearby, an old shed slapped together out of clay, and he says he wants to live alone, anywhere, he says—that hut in the yard there would work fine.

"But you are a Hakham," says Chaim. "How could you possibly live alone in a hut?"

But Jacob insists.

"I'm a simple man," he says.

Osman doesn't really get it, but he rushes to arrange for the shed to be tidied up now for Jacob all the same.

ON THE SLEEVES OF SABBATAI ZEVI'S HOLY SHIRT

WITTEL HAS THICK CURLS the color of the grass in autumn. She is tall, with a good build. She holds her head high. She appointed herself to Jacob's service. She glides between Iwanie's houses, graceful, jocular, flushed. She is witty. Since Jacob's hut is in their yard, she has taken on the role of his protector, at least until the arrival of his rightful wife, Hana, and their kids. For now Wittel has a monopoly on Jacob. Everybody is always wanting something from him, always pestering him, and Wittel is the one who shoos them away. Sometimes people come down just to look at where he lives, and then Wittel goes and beats carpets on the fence and blocks the entrance with her body.

"The Lord is resting. The Lord is praying. The Lord is delivering His blessing to our people."

By day everyone works, and Jacob can often be seen amongst them, with his shirt unbuttoned—for Jacob never gets cold—as he chops wood in a frenzy or unloads carts and carries bags of flour. Only when the sun sets do they all gather for the teachings. It used to be that the men and women heard the teachings separately, but He has introduced a different custom now into Iwanie. Now the teachings are for all adults.

The elders sit on benches while the youth squeeze in along the bundles of grain. The best part of the teachings is the start of them, because

Jacob always tells funny stories that make them all burst out laughing. Jacob likes dirty jokes.

"In my youth," he begins, "I went to one village where they had never seen a Jew before. I drove up to the inn where all the farmhands and the wenches went. The wenches were weaving, and the farmhands were filling their heads with all sorts of different stories. There was one of them that spotted me and launched into insults, and kept on mocking me. He started telling this story about the Jewish God and the Christian God, how the Christian smacked the Jew smack dab in the kisser. This seemed to really crack them up because they belly-laughed like the guy was some first-class wit, even though of course he wasn't. So I told them one, too, about Mohammed and Saint Peter. And Mohammed says to Peter, 'I got a good idea to rut you, good and Greek.' Peter didn't want to, but Mohammed was strong, and he tied Peter to a tree and did his thing. Peter howling out how his backside was burning, how he'd take him on as his saint now, if he'd only just stop.

"Well, my little story didn't go over so well, and the farmhands and the wenches had all cast their eyes down to the ground, but then that more aggressive one said to me, like to make peace, 'Let's call a truce,' he says, 'We won't say nothing on your God, and you don't say nothing on ourn. And let alone Saint Peter.'"

The men chuckle, and the women look down, but in fact they all like it that Jacob, a saint and a scholar, is also just himself, without turning his nose up. They like that he lives on his own in that little hut, and that he wears regular clothes. They love him for it. Especially the women. The women of the true faith are confident and gregarious. They like to flirt, and what Jacob teaches pleases them: that they can forget the Turkish customs that say they ought to be shut up inside their homes. He says Iwanie needs women just as much as men, for different things, but still it needs them all the same.

Jacob also teaches that from now on there is nothing that belongs to just one person; no one has things of his or her own. If anybody was to need something, he is to request it of the person who has had it prior, and his request shall inevitably be granted. Alternatively those in want can go to the steward Osman or to Chava, and whatever their lacks, they will be attended to—if their shoes fall apart, or their shirt comes unraveled, or the like.

"Even without any money?" shouts one of the women, and the other women are quick to respond: "In return for those pretty eyes . . ."

And everyone laughs.

Not everyone understands the thing about giving up their belongings. Yeruchim and Haim from Warsaw keep saying that it can't last, that people are greedy by nature and will just want more and more and try to turn a profit off the things that they receive. But others, like Nachman and Moshe, say they've seen this kind of community work before. So they stick up for Jacob. Nachman in particular is a big supporter of the idea. He can often be found delivering his speech on the subject around the different households of the village:

"This was exactly how it used to be in the world before there were laws. Everything was held in common, every good belonged to everyone, and everyone had enough, and the commands 'Thou shalt not steal' and 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' didn't exist because if anybody had said them nobody else would have even understood. 'What is stealing?' they would have asked. 'What is adultery?' We should live in the same way, because the old law no longer applies to us now. There have been three: Sabbatai, Berechiah, and now Jacob. He is the greatest of them, and he is our salvation. We must rejoice that our time is the time of salvation. The old laws no longer apply."

During Hanukkah, Jacob distributes pieces of Sabbatai Zevi's shirt as relics. This is a great event for the entire community. It is the shirt that the First One threw to Halabi's son; Schorr recently purchased both its sleeves from Halabi's son's granddaughter, paying a pretty price for them, too. Now pieces of the material — each of them smaller than a fingernail — make their way into amulets, little cherrywood boxes, pockets, and leather pouches worn around the neck. The rest of the shirt is placed in the box at Osman's. It will belong to all those who have yet to arrive.

ON THE WORKINGS OF JACOB'S TOUCH

Moshe from Podhajce, who knows everything, sits among the women weaving. He is very warm. Clouds of fragrant smoke rise toward the wooden ceiling.

"You all know," he says, "the prayer that talks about Eloah encountering the demon of illnesses, who used to set up shop in people's extremities and so make them sick. But Eloah says to the demon, 'Just as you can't drink down the whole sea, so you will not do any further harm to mankind.' Just like that. And Jacob, our Lord, is like Eloah: he, too, can

converse with the demon of illnesses. And all he has to do is give him a dirty look, and off the demon goes."

This makes sense to them. For there is ever an endless procession of people standing at the door to Jacob's shed, and if Wittel permits them inside, into the presence of the Lord, Jacob will lay his hands on the heads of the suffering, moving his thumb over their foreheads, back and forth, sometimes he blows in their faces—and it almost always helps. They say that he has hot hands that can melt away all maladies, all variety of pain.

Jacob's fame quickly spreads through the vicinity, and even local peasants end up coming to Iwanie (which they call "calling on the slubs"). They're suspicious of these oddballs, neither Jews nor Gypsies. But Jacob rests his hands on their heads, too. In exchange they leave eggs, chickens, apples, grain. Chava tucks everything away in her chamber and distributes it evenly later on. Every child receives an egg for Shabbat. Chava says "for Shabbat," although in reality Jacob has told them not to keep the Sabbath. All the same, unable to get used to this new edict, they still mark the passage of time from Shabbat to Shabbat.

In February something strange occurs, a real miracle, but of this Moshe knows next to nothing. Jacob has forbidden talk of it. Chaim, on the other hand, was there. A Podolian girl grew ill, very ill by the time she was brought in—for she had begun even to die. And her father let out a terrible howl, tearing out his own beard in despair because she had been his most beloved child. They sent for Jacob. At first when he got there he only shouted at them to shut up. Then he holed up with the girl for a while—and then when he left, she was cured. And he told her to wear white.

"What did you do to her?" asked Shlomo, Wittel's husband.

"I had relations with her, and she got better," said Jacob. And he refused to say any more on the matter.

Shlomo, a polite and serious man, did not at first understand what he had just been told. He couldn't quite recover from it after. That evening Jacob smiled at him as though perceiving Shlomo's torment, and he reached out and tugged him gently in by the nape of the neck like a girl does with a boy. He blew into his eyes and told him not to tell anyone. Then he went off and paid him no more mind.

But Shlomo did tell his wife, though she swore she'd keep it secret. And yet, although no one knew how it had happened, within a few days all of Iwanie had heard the secret. Words are like lizards, able to elude all containment.

ON WHAT THE WOMEN SAY WHILE PLUCKING CHICKENS

First, that the face of the Bible's Jacob served as the model when God was creating the angels' human faces.

Second, that the Moon has Jacob's face.

Third, that you can engage a man to give you children if you can't get pregnant with your husband.

They recall the story of Issachar, son of Jacob and Leah: Leah engaged Jacob to sleep with her and then bore him a son. She compensated Jacob with a mandrake found by Reuben in the desert, much desired by the infertile Rachel. (Then Rachel ate that mandrake and bore Jacob his son Joseph.) All this in the Scriptures.

Fourth, that you can get pregnant by Jacob without him even brushing up against your pinky finger.

Fifth, that when God created the angels, right away they opened up their mouths and praised Him. And, too, when God created Adam, the angels piped right up: "Is this the man we are to worship?" "No," replied God. "This is a thief. He will steal a fruit from my tree." So when Noah was born, the angels asked excitedly, "Is this the man we are to praise to high heaven?" Yet God replied, in consternation, "No, this is just an ordinary drunk." When Abraham was born, they asked again, but God, gone gloomy, replied, "No, this one was not born circumcised and will only later convert to my faith." When Isaac was born, the angels asked God, still hopeful, "Is it this one?" "No," replied God, severely displeased indeed. "This one loves his eldest son, who hates me." But when Jacob was born, they asked their question once more, and this time, the response was, "Yes, this is him."

Several of the men working on the shed stop doing what they're doing so they can stand in the doorway and eavesdrop on the women. Soon their heads are white with feathers: someone must have snatched up one of the baskets with a little too much zeal.